

A priest parked his car in a no-parking zone in a large city because he was short of time and couldn't find a space with a meter. So he put a note under the windshield wiper that read, "I have circled the block 10 times. If I don't park here I'll miss my appointment. FORGIVE US OUR TRESPASSES."

When he returned, he found a citation from a police officer with this note, "I've circled this block for 10 years. If I don't give you a ticket, I'll lose my job. LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION."

I want to do 2 things – with just 2 points today. Don't get all excited. Torture time is normal. First a little explanation about our first reading from Genesis, and then a reflection on the Lord's prayer. I want to look at this Old Testament passage about Sodom & Gomorrah because it has a unique part in the ongoing understanding of God, morality and forgiveness. But it needs to be understood correctly or it becomes a clumsy weapon used against our gay brothers and sisters.

Humans have always sought to understand the morality of God – the ultimate judge. But our understandings are always colored by the moral sensibilities of each generation's theologians. Would God afflict a child for the sin of her parents, or extract revenge for an offense through multiple generations? Would an army face defeat because of the disobedience of one soldier? Would an entire nation suffer for the failures of its king?

People in the Bible believed, as we still do today, that if a person breaks a law, there should be consequences. Some cultures preferred to employ the death sentence for offenses we would consider mere infractions or moral lapses. Some punishments, too, seem outsized and disproportionate: wiping out a whole family or village in retribution for a single murder. Eventually Biblical morality progressed to a much higher standard of morality – an eye-for-an-eye and a tooth-for-a-tooth – aiming for an even-stein balance of justice. But letting people off the hook was not an option.

In the stories of scripture, particularly the Old Testament, we often see the wrath of an angry God in full display. It appears that Moses had his hands full keeping God from destroying the tribes of Israel altogether. The prophets delivered God's warnings and threats as a full-time occupation. The story of Eden is a kind of apologetics for the sum total of misery in the world: we asked for it, and we deserve it. Cain and Abel, Noah's ark, the tower of Babel, the early chapters of Genesis seek to explain the reason for the world's ills through the lens of human, moral failure. The basic message is that if God is angry with us, God has good reason to be.

Which brings us to Abraham's bargaining over the fate of the city of Sodom. Now no two towns have ever had quite the reputation of Sodom and Gomorrah – not even Las Vegas! Of the 2, Sodom evidently outstripped Gomorrah for the prize of most dissolute, because its name often stands alone in our references. Familiar to many fundamentalists as one of the 'lobber passages' against homosexuality, most scholars today understand the overarching sin of Sodom to be the scandal of inhospitality to strangers. Remember that to deny someone hospitality in a desert country could be the same as killing them. There were no BIG MACS in ancient Israel! But inhospitality is a weak term for how Sodom abused travelers who came into the city. It was extreme violence – gang rape – outrageous abuse – based on a society of greed, selfishness, and indifference to the needs of others. Sodom's abuse of travelers stands in shocking contrast to Abraham's welcome of these same strangers that we heard of in last week's first reading. It would be hard to explain the horrendous behavior of the people of Sodom with the modern understanding of the homosexual orientation.

Of the nearly 2 dozen references to the city in the Bible, the Letter of Jude alone hints at a sexual component to its criminality. But rape is a crime of violence; it has nothing to do with sexual orientation. Period.

But the name of Sodom became a byword for God's absolute justice in response to the wicked. What Abraham seeks to do in his dickering with God is therefore astounding. He doesn't simply appeal to God for eye-for-an-eye justice: kill the wicked, spare the innocent. Rather, Abraham attempts to use the innocent themselves as barter for a full pardon for all. Does the presence of 50 guiltless citizens mitigate the sinfulness of hundreds or thousands? Abraham suggests that it does, and that amnesty for all is how the 'judge of all the world' shows justice. This puts us into entirely new theological territory, and prepares us for the later revelation of Jesus.

In this debate, Abraham appears at first glance to be more moral than God. The flood story of old revealed God's impatience with sinners and the desire to wipe them out and spare only the 8 good people of Noah's family. Abraham argues for more than that. For the sake of 10 righteous people, he asks God to forgo judgment altogether.

This story points out that Abraham's argument planted a new idea in the traditional understanding of sin and judgment. Later, Jeremiah carried it further in asserting that Jerusalem would be spared if one good person could be found. Unhappily he, like Abraham, could not meet the specified quota, and destruction followed in both cases. Rabbinic literature contains the notion that 36 righteous people are responsible for the preservation of the world in each generation. Should we fail to make our quota, the earth will not endure.

Which brings us to Jesus. Christians believe that the salvation of humanity is achieved in the sacrifice of one man, whose innocent blood takes away the sin of the entire world. For the sake of the one, sin is remitted for all -- and the sting of death is overthrown. Abraham started something in his ancient debate. He began a bartering process that created a new way of thinking about crime and punishment.

The Christian brand of amnesty goes by the name forgiveness, which means 'to cover.' Our debt of sin is covered by our participation in forgiveness -- as we give, so shall we receive, and as we forgive, so shall we be forgiven. (adapted from Alice Camille, PREPARE THE WORD, July 29, 2007)

Which brings us to the Lord's prayer, and my second and last point.

Our Father, who art in heaven.....

***YES?

Don't interrupt me, I'm praying.

***But you called me.

Called you? I didn't call you, I'm praying 'Our Father who art in heaven....

***There, you did it again.

Did what?

***Called me. You said 'Our Father who art in heaven.' Here I am.....what's on your mind?

But I didn't mean anything by it. I was, you know, just saying my prayers for the day. I always say 'The Lord's Prayer.' It makes me feel good, kind of like getting a duty done.

***All right. Go on.

Hallowed be Thy name....

***Hold it. What do you mean by that?

By what?

***By 'Hallowed be Thy name?'

It means....it means.....Good grief, I don't know what it means. How should I know? It's just part of the prayer. By the way, what DOES it mean?

***It means honored, holy, wonderful.

Hey, that makes sense. I never thought about what 'hallowed' meant before. "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

***Do you really mean that?

Sure, why not?

***What are you doing about it?

Doing? Nothing I guess. I just think it would be kind of neat if you got control of everything down here like you have up there.

***Have I got control of you?

Well, I go to church.

***That isn't what I asked you. What about your bad temper? You've got a real problem there, you know. And then there's the way you spend your money – all on yourself. No tithing to your church and no service to the poor. And what about the kind of books you read and the stuff you look at on the internet?

Stop picking on me! I'm just as good as some of the rest of those people at church.

***Excuse me. I thought you were praying for my will to be done. If that is to happen, it will have to start with the ones who are praying for it. Like you, for example.

Oh, all right. I guess I do have some hang-ups. Now that you mention it, I could probably name some others.

***So could I.

I haven't thought about it much till now, but I really would like to cut out some of those things. I would like to, you know, be really free.

***Good. Now we're getting somewhere. We'll work together, you and I. Some victories can truly be won. I'm proud of you.

Look, Lord, I need to finish up here. This is taking a lot longer than it usually does. "Give us this day, our daily bread."

***You need to cut out the bread. You're getting rather chunky; Too many carbs are bad for your health.

Hey, wait a minute! What is this, 'Criticize me day?' Here I was doing my religious duty, and all of a sudden you break in and remind me of all of my hang-ups.

***Praying is a dangerous thing. You could wind up changed, you know. That's what I'm trying to get across to you. You called me, and here I am. It's too late to stop now. Keep praying. I'm interested in the next part of your prayer.....(pause).....Well, go on.

I'm scared to.

***Scared? Of what?

I know what you'll say.

***Try me and see.

"Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us."

***What about Ann?

See? I knew it! I knew you would bring her up! Why Lord, she's told lies about me, spread stories about my family. She never paid back the debt she owes me. I've sworn to get even with her!

***But your prayer? What about your prayer?

I didn't mean it.

***Well, at least you're honest. But it's not much fun carrying that load of bitterness around inside, is it?

No. But I'll feel better as soon as I get even. Boy, have I got some plans for that neighbor. She'll wish she never moved into this neighborhood.

***You won't feel any better. You'll feel worse. Revenge isn't sweet. Think of how unhappy you already are. But I can change all that.

You can? How?

***Forgive Ann. Then I'll forgive you. Then the hate and sin will be Ann's problem and not yours. You will have settled your heart.

Oh, you're right. You always are. And more than I want to revenge Ann, I want to be right with you.....(pause).....(sigh.) All right. All right. I forgive her. Help her find the right road in life, Lord. She's bound to be awfully miserable now that I think about it. Anybody who goes around doing some of the things she does to others has to be out of it. Someway, somehow, show her the right way.

***There now! Wonderful. How do you feel?

Hmmmmmm. Well, not bad. Not bad at all. In fact, I feel pretty great! You know, I don't think that I'll have to go to bed uptight for the first time since I can remember. Maybe I won't be so tired from now on because I'm not getting enough rest.

***You're not through with your prayer. Go on.

Oh, all right. "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

***Good! Good! I'll do that. Just don't put yourself in a place where you can be tempted.

What do you mean by that?

***Don't turn the TV on when you know the laundry has to be done or the house needs cleaned or your spouse or kids need your help or attention. And please don't use me for an escape hatch.

I don't understand the last part.

***Sure you do, you've done it a lot of times. You get caught in a bad situation. You get into trouble and then you come running to me, "Lord, help me out of this mess and I promise, I'll never do it again." You remember some of those bargains you tried to make with me?

Yes, and I'm ashamed, Lord. I really am. Up until now I thought that if I just prayed the Lord's prayer everyday, then I could do what I liked.

***Go ahead and finish your prayer.

But I'm Catholic. We don't do that last part – just the Protestants, remember?

***That's the funny part about the way all of you humans keep dividing up my world. Protestants say they ONLY use scripture, and that last part is not in the scripture. Catholics say that they use scripture AND tradition, and it's in the tradition. Neither side is consistent with their own position. You people should really get your act together. But I want you to finish it. I have another point to make.

I don't want to be disrespectful, Lord, but you've made WAY MORE than 3 points. And we don't even like THAT MANY from Fr. John on Sundays. But he just ignores us when we complain.

***GET ON WITH THE PRAYER!

"For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever. Amen."

***Do you know what would bring me glory? What would really make me happy? The thing that would bring me glory is to have people like you truly love me. And then loving and serving your brothers and sisters in the world – with no exceptions, especially with some of those prejudices you still have – you know your off-color comments about gay people and people of other nations and skin colors.

Oh, you're right again. I'll try – I'll really try, I promise.

***I know you will. Now that some of these old sins are exposed and out of the way, well, there is no telling what we can do together. Glad we had this talk. Let's do it again tomorrow.

OK, Lord. Thanks. Amen. (adapted from Jan 12, 2000 email)